

VZCZCXRO7837
RR RUEHAST RUEHBI RUEHDBU RUEHLH RUEHNEH RUEHPW
DE RUEHCI #0130/01 1391135
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 191135Z MAY 09
FM AMCONSUL KOLKATA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 2361
INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHINGTON DC
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA 2898

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 KOLKATA 000130

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/INSB

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ASEC](#) [IN](#)
SUBJECT: GORKHAS SUPPORT BJP TO FURTHER GORKHALAND STATEHOOD
MOVEMENT

REF: 08 KOLKATA 66

KOLKATA 00000130 001.2 OF 002

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Voters in the West Bengal Darjeeling constituency elected the state's only Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) successful candidate to parliament as part of their ongoing movement for the creation of a new "Gorkhaland" state within the Indian Union. The political organization Gorkha Jan Mukti Morcha (GJMM) decided to support the BJP after the national party had decided to "sympathetically consider" its demand for statehood. The movement has remained non-violent as the GJMM leadership pursues a political strategy for building national level support for its cause, as contrasted with the violent separatist movements in the Northeast. Before achieving statehood the GJMM will have to address the tribal population's concerns about the proposed state's boundaries and the West Bengal voter's emotional attachment to Darjeeling and the historical scars of the previous partition of Bengal. Neither the ruling state party nor the opposition is likely to touch the controversial issue of statehood as neither wants to alienate any potential voter before the next state assembly elections anticipated for 2011. Local sentiment revolves not around if, but rather when and what form, a new state of Darjeeling will assume. PolOFF traveled to Darjeeling and Dooars from May 4 - 8 to prepare this report. End Summary.

Darjeeling - Queen of the Hills

¶2. (SBU) Since 1907, Gorkhas, who are ethnically Nepali, have sought a distinct political identity in Darjeeling, in the northern portion of West Bengal bordering Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh. The GJMM has demanded roughly 7,000 square kilometers for a separate state with approximately 2.6 million inhabitants spread across the Hills of Darjeeling, where they represent an overwhelming majority, and the contiguous plains of Dooars, where they co-exist with tribals and other ethnicities. While the district seat is in Darjeeling, the largest city is Siliguri - an important trade and transit town. The area is strategically important as India's 22-kilometer wide chicken-neck connecting the northeastern states with "mainland" India. Darjeeling, best known for its premium tea and as a tourism destination, is referred to as the "Queen of the Hills".

Bimal Gurung's GJMM Displaces Ghising's DGHC

¶3. (SBU) Bimal Gurung established the GJMM in 2007 to further the cause of statehood (Reftel). He displaced the previous Gorkha leader Subash Ghising, who had led the local administrative body, the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC). The Council is effectively defunct as its members have resigned and a non-elected administrator is currently overseeing the

basic delivery of municipal and development services. Ghising was widely unpopular due to alleged corruption and administrative incompetency. In 1988, a tripartite agreement involving the Government of India, the Government of West Bengal and the Gorkha National Liberation Front created the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) with a limited amount of administrative autonomy to end the violent conflict that had claimed more than 1,200 lives.

Non-Violent Political Statehood Movement

14. (SBU) GJMM central committee member Amar Lama re-affirmed the movement's political and non-violent nature in a May 6 meeting with PolOFF. According to Lama, GJMM had sought national party support for the issue, rather than field its own parliamentary candidate, as it believed it a more effective strategy of raising national attention. It approached both the Congress and the BJP for political support, but only the BJP was willing to include consideration of their cause in its manifesto. (The BJP has an insignificant presence in West Bengal, no BJP parliamentarians from West Bengal in the last parliament, and nothing to lose politically through its support of the controversial measure.)

15. (SBU) The current iteration of the Gorkhaland statehood movement is expressly non-violent and has largely remained so, with the exception of the rare minor skirmishes at public demonstrations. At no time have international or domestic visitors to the popular tourist destination been targeted or victims of crime. Tourists may be affected by vehicle strikes or labor unrest, such as when GJMM leaders called for a temporary strike in July 2008. Local police, reporting though their traditional chain of command, are responsible for law and order in the Hills and Plains and take appropriate measures to ensure public gatherings remain orderly. Additional public demonstrations, by either the Gorkhas or the tribals, may be expected; however, they will maintain their peaceful nature.

KOLKATA 00000130 002.2 OF 002

Challenges to Statehood: Boundaries and Emotions

16. (SBU) Proponents of Gorkhaland will have to address the tribal population's concerns about the proposed state's boundaries and the West Bengal voter's emotional attachment to Darjeeling. The GJMM has demanded both the ethnically homogenous Gorkha Hills and the more heterogeneous Plains, where the tribals are numerically superior. A leader of the tribal organization Akhil Bharatiya Adivasi Vikas Parisad told PolOFF that the tribals are not against the Gorkhaland demand for statehood in the Hills, but that this demand should not extend to the Plains. The more difficult question may be the further partition of the state of West Bengal, which has already been once attempted (1905) and once realized (1947). Bengalis are fond of their state stretching from the Bay of Bengal to the Hills of Darjeeling and are unlikely to willingly cede Darjeeling to Gorkhaland. Some interlocutors have spoken about the possibility of the administrative unit of a Union Territory within India, as opposed to a state, as this can be created by an Act of Parliament without the consent of the state assembly. However, the GJMM is resolute in its demand for statehood and furthermore believes that the consent of the state affected is not required. Constitutional law is unclear on this point, although precedent dictates that the affected states concur.

Comment

17. (SBU) Most interlocutors, Bengali or non-Bengali alike, concede that a political resolution of the Gorkhaland question will happen, the only question is when and in what form. The GJMM leadership of the Gorkhaland statehood movement has moved one step closer to its end goal through their support of the BJP and its inclusion of the "sympathetic consideration" of the Gorkhaland demand in its manifesto. With Congress and the United Progressive Alliance returning to power at the national level in the recent parliamentary polls, and the state parties

unlikely to touch the controversial issue before the state assembly polls in 2011, Gorkhaland by 2010 may be less likely today than before the elections had taken place. However, the Gorkhas can expect the new BJP parliamentarian from the Darjeeling constituency in the current state of West Bengal, the influential and former Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh, to tacitly voice their demand for a separate state in the new parliament.

TAYLOR